

## **Mission: Figure Out Billy Hargrove (subtitle; befriend Susan Hargrove) by lilies\_in\_a\_vase**

**Series:** Lilies' group of Writer's Block Bullshit - aka Standalone Fics Used To Attempt To Ignite Creativity After Having Forgotten What Words Are [5]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Abusive Neil Hargrove, Billy Hargrove Needs Love, Billy Hargrove Needs a Hug, Bisexual Joyce Byers, Cold, F/F, F/M, Family Dinners, Gay Billy Hargrove, Gen, Good Parent Claudia Henderson, Good Parent Joyce Byers, Good Parent Karen Wheeler, Good Parent Mrs. Sinclair, Happy Ending, Hurt Billy Hargrove, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Domestic Violence, M/M, Minor Joyce Byers/Jim "Chief" Hopper, Minor Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, POV Claudia Henderson, POV Joyce Byers, POV Karen Wheeler, POV Mrs. Sinclair, POV Multiple, Protective Joyce Byers, Religious Neil Hargrove, Supportive Joyce Byers, Supportive Karen Wheeler, hunger, no beta we die like men

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Billy Hargrove, Claudia Henderson, Holly Wheeler, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Mr. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Mrs. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Nancy Wheeler, Neil Hargrove, Steve Harrington, Susan Hargrove, Ted Wheeler, The Party (Stranger Things)

**Relationships:** Billy Hargrove & Claudia Henderson, Billy Hargrove & Karen Wheeler, Billy Hargrove & Mrs. Sinclair, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers & Billy Hargrove, Karen Wheeler & Joyce Byers & Claudia Henderson & Mrs. Sinclair, Karen Wheeler & Susan Hargrove, Karen Wheeler/Ted Wheeler, Mr. Sinclair/Mrs. Sinclair (Stranger Things), Neil Hargrove/Susan Hargrove

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2021-05-16

**Updated:** 2021-05-16

**Packaged:** 2022-04-01 00:56:14

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 10,279

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

## **Summary:**

In which instead of flirting back with a teenager, Karen Wheeler decides to question why, exactly, a teenager would feel the need to flirt with her?

She decides to go on a mission. But she's going to need a little help.

## **Mission: Figure Out Billy Hargrove (subtitle; befriend Susan Hargrove)**

### **Author's Note:**

Basically, I thought it would be fun to explore why Karen would feel like flirting back with Billy, and then thinking about what might have gone differently if she hadn't. If she decided that her marriage problems were hers and Ted's to deal with, and not random pretty teenager she just met.

### **TRIGGER WARNING:**

There are references to child abuse and domestic violence in this work, and during Mrs. Sinclair's POV there is also a description of injuries.

### **Disclaimer:**

I don't own "Stranger Things".

When Karen was a little girl, she - like most little girls - dreamed of being a princess and marrying a prince.

It was an idea that was reinforced by her parents. She was always a bit of a daddy's girl, and he would buy her dresses and dolls and swing her around in his arms, let her twirl around in the living room and kitchen until she got dizzy from spinning. Her mum would teach her how to cook, how to take care of a house, would tell her that one day she would become a great mother. When she brought her first boyfriend home, when she got picked up to go to prom, her mum would fix her hair and her dad would shake the boy's hand and tell him he wanted his daughter home on time.

But she'd always been curious of the world. She'd been a romantic,

yes, more than a realist, but she'd been planning on going to college, had thought she'd take a gap year and figure out what she wanted to do with her life, what possibilities she had, and then she would leave, she would go and see the world.

She never got out of Hawkins.

Her dad got sick, her mum needed help, her mum said they hadn't raised her to be selfish, hadn't raised her to abandon family when they needed her, and so she had stayed. She had stayed and helped her mum try to nurse her dad back to health, she had stayed and held her dad's hand when he died in the hospital, she had stayed and she had comforted her mum and her mum had comforted her and suddenly more than one year, more than two, more than three had passed. And she felt too old to go to college. She felt exhausted and too tired to deal with a world that would only beat her down.

She hadn't been ready to try.

And she'd met Ted. Ted, who was a few years older than her, who's family her mum approved of, who's father had worked with her dad, and Ted wanted a family and Ted thought she was beautiful and Ted had a well paying job, and Karen had always wanted to be a mother and she knew he wasn't her prince but maybe he was good enough.

So she had married him. She had married him, and she'd been content those first few years, before Ted started working so much that he was always tired when he came home. Because he'd had a promotion right after marrying her, and she'd had a big house to furnish and decorate however she wanted, and she'd always liked keeping things neat, had always enjoyed cooking, and Ted had made enough money so she didn't have to think about finding another job.

She had enough free time to spend the day outside, to spend time with friends, to re-live those years she'd lost crying about her father. But taking care of her dad had made her realise she was good at that. She was good at being a caretaker. She could take care of things, of people.

A few years later they had Nancy, and Karen had her own little princess to raise. Three years later, they'd had a boy, and they gave him the name of an Archangel, and then, when Nancy was twelve and Mike was nine, they had another daughter, and those years Karen was so busy raising her children she didn't notice when what little romance she had died.

But the kids are older now, Nancy is smarter and stronger than her and soon she will spread her wings and leave the safety of the nest Karen's made her, and Mike will follow only a few short years later and then all she can hope for is around ten years with Holly before she's gone, too.

The older two don't need her as much any more, and the youngest one is happy being by herself at times, so for the first time in years Karen is free enough to look at her life, at her marriage, and find it empty of the love she's craved since she was a little girl and dreamed of being a princess.

She styles her hair, because she wants to feel beautiful, and if no one else is going to take care of her, then she will at least make sure she is. So she buys roses, and she lights candles in the bathroom, and she puts bubbles in the bath, and she gets herself a glass of wine, red like passion, and she lowers herself into the water with a novel in hand, and escapes into a fantasy world with steamy romances and handsome men and beautiful women.

She ignores the first knock, the first chime of their doorbell, because she'd told Ted she was taking a bath and he'd been on the first floor when she'd gone up.

But then it comes again, pulling her out of the book right as they're about to kiss, so she turns her head towards the door and yells for Ted to open.

When it rings for the fifth time, she huffs and stands up, water sloshing around her. She grabs her bathrobe, which she's going to have to throw in the wash because she doesn't have time to wash off the soapy water clinging to her skin before putting it on.

Ted's sleeping, and Karen wishes she was brave enough to slap his shoulder or leg, make him wake up and go and answer because she doesn't know who's on the other side and she's naked beneath her robe.

Billy Hargrove is charming, is Karen's first thought, her first impression of him. Billy Hargrove is charming, and Billy Hargrove looks a bit like the man on the cover of the novel left on the closed toilet seat upstairs, and Billy Hargrove is a teenager.

He's a teenager looking for his little sister, and Karen remembers her son complaining about a new girl his friends wanted joining their little group, and remembers her oldest daughter complaining about a new classmate and thinks 'This must be them'.

Nancy isn't the girl to bring home boys, to go on dates, Steve Harrington is her first boyfriend and he didn't come to the doorway to say hello to her and Ted before picking their daughter up. But Karen has heard her friends speak about how their daughters' boyfriends have been polite and charming, have promised the fathers they won't let anything happen to their daughter and have charmed their mothers in the hope it will make them like them, will leave a good first impression. Like Karen's boyfriends had done.

So when Billy looks her up and down and tells her he didn't know Nancy had a sister, Karen isn't surprised. She isn't tricked into believing it's anything genuine, any real attraction, but she does find herself blushing, feeling flattered and enjoying having someone appreciate her. Because she's so painfully lonely, and Billy is her daughter's classmate, which means he's safe. Nothing will happen between them. Karen knows she isn't strong like Nancy, knows she enjoys the benefits her life brings her too much to risk a real affair, knows she loves her children too much to file for a divorce. So a little harmless flirting for less than a minute won't do any real damage.

But then, a week later, Billy is back. He's been picking Max up all week, but he's stayed in his car, has honked twice to let her know he's there, so this is only the second time he's standing on her doorstep.

And he's flirting again. He's licking his lips, over a bloody split in the lower one that has almost fully healed. Karen doesn't know if she would call herself observant, but she can see the cut on his forehead that he's trying to hide behind his hair, and she does notice the bruise poking out from beneath his shirt collar.

She's taken aback by his continuous flirting, her mind running in circles looking for what she's supposed to say and coming up empty.

He must notice she isn't reciprocating, and he seems to shift, trying to burrow deeper into his leather jacket. He's from California, she's learned, and Hawkins winters can get as cold as thirty. Billy must be used to around eighty degrees. But it feels like he's hiding from her more than the cold.

She's feeling less and less flattered by the minute. She's left feeling uneasy. Afraid, almost. For Billy, not of him. Because this boy is her daughter's age, this boy is only three years older than her son, this boy is a teenager, is someone's child, and he shouldn't be flirting with women who are old enough to be his mother. And she can't help but wonder why he is.

So Karen decides she's going to do something. She's always been good at caretaking, and she's bored, if she's completely honest. She's going to stage an intervention.

It takes a week to arrange, but then finally, on Friday, while the kids are all out and Ted is at work, Karen opens the door and welcomes Joyce Byers, Claudia Henderson, and Viola Sinclair into her home.

They take their seats in the living room, and Karen brings in a tray of homemade lemonade.

"You said you had something important you needed to talk to us about?" Viola says, reaching for a glass and taking a sip.

Joyce is sending her a worried look, her hand tapping against her leg. Karen wasn't friends with any of these women while she was in high school, but she still knew them, somewhat, and Joyce has always

been a bit of a bad girl, skipping class to smoke with Jim Hopper. She's grown antsy since she had her children. Since her marriage and divorce to Lonnie Byers.

"Yes," Karen says, smoothing her skirt down, standing before them and breathing deeply before speaking. "You all know Max? Maxine?"

Viola hums, amused. "Yes, Lucas has grown quite infatuated with her."

"Well, her brother. Billy."

"Yes?"

"He flirted with me," Karen says, the words leaving her in a rush. She's worried they're going to be disgusted, that they're going to think she initiated it.

But Claudia smiles, and Viola outright chuckles. "What is this about, Karen?"

Karen sits down on the edge of the couch with a sigh. "I'm worried. Once, is... well, I suppose I think it's innocent. But he's done it several times. And I never know how to respond. And I... what's his mother like? I think I saw her when I went shopping, a redhead with Max?"

“She’s not his mother. She’s Max’,” Joyce says. “They’re stepsiblings, their parents are married, but they haven’t... I don’t know how long they’ve been married.”

“Oh,” Karen says, thinking *‘Where is his mother? How long has she been gone? What kind of woman is the new Mrs. Hargrove?’*

“What do you want us to do?” Claudia asks.

“I don’t know,” Karen says. “I just can’t stop thinking about it. It isn’t normal, is it? I mean, what if one of our sons... with one of us...? I... I can’t. It makes me feel ill. It isn’t normal.”

“It isn’t,” Viola agrees. Karen looks up, sees her swallow, sees them all share similar looks of distaste.

“But I think it’s normal for him,” Karen whispers. “Because when I didn’t flirt back, he seemed shocked. He seemed like he wanted to run away. Then, when he’d healed up more, he came back again, and while we waited for Max he tried to do it again. As though the fact that he was hurt was the problem.”

Joyce frowns. “He was hurt? How hurt?”

“His lip had been split, there was a cut on his forehead that he tried to hide behind his hair, a fading bruise that I could just see on his collarbone.”

“Viola,” Joyce says, her voice loaded, looking up at the other woman across the coffee table.

Viola breathes deeply. “It’s too little to go on, Joyce. I can’t say anything. Not yet.”

“But it’s possible?”

“It’s possible.”

“What? What is?” Karen asks, feeling like she’s watching a tennis match without knowing the rules.

“Joyce thinks someone is hurting him,” Claudia replies, quietly.

“I think someone at home is abusing him like Lonnie tried to abuse me and my sons.”

“Oh,” Karen breathes, and then thinks, *of course*. She’d known boys in high school who started fights with each other, and they were always proud of the evidence, proud to show it off. They weren’t trying to hide it like Billy.

When she says goodbye to the others, Karen knows they haven’t actually made a decision, they haven’t actually set a course for what

to do, but she does feel like they have an understanding.

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Claudia would like to think that she knows how to take care of boys.

Dustin's father left them when he was three, so it's been pretty much just the two of them for the last ten or so years. And Mews, and now Tews.

But, she thinks she knows boys. Children. Teenagers. She would like to say she knows how to read their signals.

And, well, the boy before her is sending pretty strong signals right about now.

Dustin and his friends spent the afternoon at their place, and Claudia made them dinner an hour ago, and now she's just finished a fourth batch of chocolate muffins.

Billy Hargrove is staring down at his feet, his cheeks red, and they're both pretending they didn't hear his stomach rumble the second she opened the door and the smell from the kitchen drifted out.

"It might take them a couple of minutes to finish," Claudia says. "You should come and wait inside, out of the cold."

And when it looks like Billy's about to protest, Claudia remembers what Karen said, and she doesn't think she's as pretty as Karen but it's worth a try.

"Keep me company?"

And Billy's gaze shifts, his head tilting a little, the start of a crooked smile appearing, like he's picking up on some invincible signs that never should be there for him to pick up on at all.

But the important thing is that he follows her inside, and she leads him to the kitchen.

There, she turns her back to him and immediately puts the last of the food she'd made on a plate, grabbing a fork and a knife, and placing it down on the table.

"Sit."

Billy doesn't. Billy stares, confused at her and longingly at the food, and Claudia sighs.

"Have you had dinner yet?" she asks.

“No.”

*Will you have when you get home?*

“Then eat. I’m going to have to throw it away otherwise. I made too much and there’s no room in the fridge for leftovers.” It’s a lie, but not one Billy will ever find out the truth about.

Billy looks at her for a second, as though he’s trying to figure out the catch, but then he pulls out the chair and sits down.

He’s eating quickly. She could say that it’s because he’s feeling uncomfortable and wants to get out of here, wants to get his sister and go home, and all of those things might be true. But she also gets the feeling that he’s eating because he’s hungry, and he hasn’t had food in a while, be it a couple hours or a day or two - *God, she hopes it hasn’t been more than a day* - and he’s afraid someone will take it away from him, shovelling the food down.

When he’s finished he doesn’t look up at her. He bites his lip, and she thinks he doesn’t know what to say. Like he’s trying to figure out which way to play this.

Claudia grabs a fresh, warm muffin and places it down in front of him, taking the plate away and turning her back on him. Giving him a little privacy and pretending she didn’t see the way his eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s chocolate. Do you like chocolate, honey?”

“Who doesn’t like chocolate?”

Claudia smiles to herself, putting the plate in the sink and turning on the water to wash it. “Very true, but you never know.”

“It’s very good, Ms. Henderson. You’re an incredible cook. Thanks.”

She laughs heartily. “Thank you. Will you go see if the kids are done? I don’t want to have to keep you longer, although they probably enjoyed a couple extra minutes. Dusty’s room is just down the hall.”

She hears him stand up and leave, and puts the plate on the drying rack, before going over to a drawer and getting out three little plastic bags.

She puts a couple muffins in each of them, and when Billy comes back with Max in tow, she holds them out to him. He’s frowning at her, but he takes them, Max staring at them.

“I made too many,” she says. “So I thought you two could bring some home. I’ll get the boys a couple, too.”

“Thank you, Ms. Henderson!” Max says, reaching out for one of the

bags. The muffins are so warm they're filling the insides with steam.

Billy smiles at her, swallowing, his eyes big. Claudia wishes she could reach out and ruffle his hair.

But she can't, so she just follows them to the front door, and she sees the way Billy sneakily moves one of the bags of muffins to his side, handing the other to Max. She closes the door as he starts the car, pulling away from her driveway.

She thinks that Karen was right to worry.

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Karen has always had the impression that Susan Hargrove is a nervous woman.

Even now, standing in Melvald's and looking at the range of cereal options, she's twisting a strand of red hair between her fingers. Back and forth she goes. She's a tall woman, but it always seems like she's trying to make herself appear smaller. There's a perpetual frown between her eyebrows, as though the decision of which cereal she brings home is the most important one there is.

Karen knows that some would think that for a housewife like Karen,

the choice of cereal would be that important, but not even Karen cares that much. And from what she knows, Susan Hargrove is a working woman, too. The Hargrove-Mayfields live on Cherry, so she must be.

“Susan!” Karen calls, waving.

Susan jumps, quickly glancing around to see who’d called her name. Her eyes land on Karen, and she visibly relaxes.

When Nancy was little, they’d had a bunny for a few years. Susan reminds her of that scared little bunny, suddenly.

Karen walks up to her, sticking her hand out for a handshake. “I’m Karen Wheeler,” she says as Susan shakes it. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you since I heard you moved here back in November!”

“You have?”

“Yes!” She reaches out, taking Susan with her so they’re arm in arm, walking down the aisles like two schoolgirls. “You see, I see myself as a bit of an organiser for the mum’s here in Hawkins. And you’ve moved so far, I thought you mustn’t know anyone here yet! We have a book club, with meetings once a month. Then there’s the exercise group, perhaps you could join us during your lunch breaks? We also like to go to the salon together, or have bi-weekly meet-ups to discuss the new recipes in the magazine. Oh! Perhaps you could show us some of the ones you know from California?”

Susan stops her and lays a hand on Karen's arm. "Karen. I'm very flattered to hear you're so concerned of my social life, but, well, frankly, I don't really know you, and my husband—"

Karen doesn't want to hear the end of that sentence. She plasters on a smile and continues. "Yes, that's a great idea! We should get to know each other more closely! After all, Maxine is already friends with my son Mike," Something like recognition falls over Susan's face. "And Nancy and Billy are in the same year."

Susan frowns. "They are?"

Karen tries to remind herself that it is bad to judge someone before getting to know them. But still, does this woman not know anything about her stepson?

"Yes! What do you say about dinner at our place? Friday next week?"

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Lucas is hanging out with Max and Dustin in his room when Viola hears the Camaro pull up.

She checks the clock in the kitchen, frowning a bit at the time. Max' brother is around half an hour early. Next, she goes up to the kitchen

windows, pulling the curtain to the side to glance outside.

When he comes to pick up Max, he's either going up and ringing the doorbell, or he's staying in the car and honking until he's certain she's heard.

But now, Viola is just in time to see him lean his head back against his seat in a way that can only be described as world-weary. He hugs his middle, and turns off the engine, the lights going out and leaving the street in darkness.

Viola doesn't like that look much. Doesn't like what it's signalling to her.

She leaves the kitchen to go into the small office she shares with her husband. Samuel's the one who uses it the most, working late in the evening sometimes, but she does keep some of her medical books in there, and she keeps her doctor's bag and first aid kit in there.

Samuel looks up from his work when she steps inside. She grabs her bag and holds it up to him.

"Max' brother," she explains, and a look of understanding falls over his face. She'd explained Karen's, and Joyce's, concerns to him the same day she heard them. They've both been waiting for something like this to happen.

Samuel smiles sadly at her, nods, and she leaves him to his work,

closing the door gently behind her. She leaves her bag on the kitchen table and pulls on her coat before stepping into the winter evening.

She taps on the window of the Camaro, taking note of how he flinches, jumps in his seat and then groans, clutching at his ribs.

To his credit, all lines of pain - at least, those not apparent to a doctor - are hidden away by the time he rolls his window down.

“Ma’am?”

He’s breathing shallowly.

Viola smiles. “Come inside. It’s too cold to wait out here.”

His gaze moves down to where her hand rests on his rolled down window, fingers curled so they’re reaching inside the Camaro. He looks back up at her, from beneath his lashes, biting his lip and starting to grin.

*Jesus.*

Viola turns around, expecting him to follow, and indeed, only a few seconds later she hears the Camaro door open and close, his boots crunching on the thin layer of freshly fallen snow.

He follows her into the kitchen, and she gestures for him to take a seat in the chair she'd pulled out from the table.

"Do you prefer Billy or William?" she asks, leaning back against it as she watches him sit, winching a little as he goes.

"Either one's fine, ma'am."

"William, then," she decides. "That's what I've been thinking of you as, anyway."

He smiles crookedly at her. "You've been thinking of me?"

Viola feels like crying. "Oh, sweetheart," she sighs, turning her back to him and opening her bag. "Take off your shirt."

"I saw two cars in the driveway, do you really think we should...? With your husband at home?"

*Good Lord.* Viola sighs, and turns back around to face him, her hands on her hips. "William. I'm a doctor. Now take off your shirt."

The poor boy looks ready to bolt.

Viola sits down and reaches out, lays a hand on his much colder one.

There's no blood, no bruises on his knuckles, but mentioning that won't help her. His eyes look scared, guarded, where before they were only charming. "If you leave without letting me take a look, I'll call an ambulance to your house. Do you understand?"

William swallows, his eyes shifting to the door. "Nothing happened-I'm not, it was just-"

"A fight with some other boy in class? Perhaps about some girl? Or some other kind of argument? That doesn't matter to me." *It does.* "But I can't let you leave here in good conscience when I know you're hurt without me knowing how bad."

He doesn't move for a second, just seeming to search her expression for something. He must find what he looked for, because he nods, and starts to pull off his shirt.

*It could be worse*, Viola thinks as she takes in the bruises mottling his side. It could always be worse. Viola has dealt with people coming in from car accidents. Has had some die clutching her hand.

But still. There's something about children. About children being hurt by people who should have protected them instead.

There's a little bit of blood, surface deep, in the middle of some of the bruises. She leans closer, and can't help but think about what could have been used to create such an injury. Something heavy, surely. And stronger than a pair of fists.

If you hit with something other than your hands, there won't be any evidence left on your knuckles.

"I'm going to clean it, and then I'll feel along your ribs, alright?"

William nods, so Viola stands up, rummaging around her bag for the packet of gauze she keeps there. She takes a bit out and goes to the sink to wet it, coming back and pulling her chair closer to his.

He doesn't look at her, his head turned to the side and eyes fixed on one of Erica's drawings, but Viola hears him hiss as she first touches his skin. She doesn't apologise, because she doesn't think he'd appreciate it. She knows he wishes he wasn't in this situation, in her kitchen with his little sister's friend's mother taking care of the injuries she's certain were caused by his father.

There's a bit of swelling around two of his ribs, and as she presses along the skin, she sees his stomach muscles spasm and hears him suck in a sharp breath, breathing out shakily.

She sits back, placing the now bloody gauze on the table. William turns back to look at her, and his eyes widen when she brings out a stethoscope from her bag.

"What are you-?"

"I doubt you'd agree to let me take you to the hospital for an X-ray, so this is the bare minimum. I've got to check your lungs are doing

okay.” She levels him with a gentle look. “I know it hurts when you breathe in deep, so just try to breathe normally.”

His fingers clench and unclench nervously on his jeans, but he nods, eyes fluttering closed as she leans closer, putting the eartips in her ears and the chest piece against his skin. She watches his lungs as he breathes, and nods to herself.

“Back, too.”

He stands back up silently, turning around to straddle the chair, and Viola listens again. She’d taken the chance to check his heart, too, and it’d sounded good, if a little fast. She figures that’s to be expected, though.

She can’t help but wonder if he feels safe here. If he ever feels safe. Has he ever let his guard down around anyone?

She puts the stethoscope away and stands up. William stays where he is, with his back to her and arms on the backrest, leaning slightly forward.

Which is good, because he doesn’t see her take Samuel’s polaroid camera with her back to her seat. He doesn’t notice what she’s done until after she’s taken a photo of his bruised side.

But when he does notice, he jumps, hands coming up to clutch at his side when the movement jars his injury. “Hey!” he says, standing up

and placing a hand on the table to lean his weight on, the other one still protectively around his ribs. He looks almost betrayed when he stares at the camera in her hands. “What...?”

“In case you ever decide this was more than teenage roughhousing, I want you to keep this.” She gives him a small, sad smile. “Can I take two more?”

William seems to drop back down in exhaustion. He nods, and she moves closer again, taking a photo of the injury from the front, the way the bruises wrap around towards his chest. Then, finally, she takes one of his profile, this one farther away so his face is included, because she doesn’t want anyone to ever be able to argue he’s trying to use someone else’s photographs as evidence of what’s happened to him.

She looks down at the photo when it appears, and feels her heart ache at the look of absolute dejection on his face. She puts the photos face down on the table in front of him. “You can put your shirt back on,” she says quietly.

William looks up at her. “You’re not going to wrap them?”

She shakes her head, wishes she could reach out and hug him. That is a question only someone used to bruised ribs is likely to ask. “No. Most of us doctors are trying to get that particular practice to stop. It prevents you taking deep breaths, and makes it easier to get pneumonia. Especially in this weather. Try to keep from any strenuous activities this month though, alright?”

He nods. “Thank you, ma’am. Eh... Dr. Sinclair, or-?”

Viola laughs lightly. “You’re welcome, William. I’ll go get Maxine.”

When Viola comes back with Maxine in tow a few minutes later, the kitchen is empty. But the photos are gone.

She opens the front door for Maxine once her shoes and coat are on, and watches her as she runs to the Camaro, climbing into the passenger seat.

Samuel comes up behind her, and together they watch the siblings drive away. She leans back against him, and he kisses her cheek. “I love you,” he whispers in her ear, and Viola squeezes his hand. She closes the door.

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Karen tells her family over dinner on Wednesday.

“I’m going to need you to be home early on Friday,” she tells Ted. “Max and her family are coming over for dinner.”

“What?” Mike says.

“That’s Michael’s new friend, isn’t it?” Ted asks between bites of mashed potato.

“Yes, they moved here from California back in November. I thought it would be nice to get to know them.”

“What?” Mike says again.

She turns to him and smiles. “Susan joined my book club. I invited them.”

Mike frowns. “Why?”

Karen sighs, exasperated. “Because, Michael, I know all your friends families expect Max’, and I thought it would be nice.”

“Will Billy be there?” Nancy pipes up.

Karen can’t really read her tone and is once again reminded of how fast Nancy is growing up. How she seems to be taking giant steps away from Karen. She would like to think she knows her daughter, but their relationship hasn’t been the same since Barbara died.

“I imagine so,” she says. “I invited the whole family.”

Mike and Nancy share a glance, and Mike scrunches his face up in distaste. Nancy seems more contemplative.

“Ugh,” Mike groans.

“Can I wear a pretty princess dress, mommy?” Holly asks.

Thankfully, Karen has one child she still understands.

“Of course you can, my darling,” she says, smiling. “In fact, all of you will be expected to dress nice for our guests.”

Mike groans again, and dinner continues on as usual.

She goes grocery shopping on Thursday and spends the day cleaning the house. On Friday, she cooks throughout the afternoon.

She’s gotten so used to the sound of the Camaro that she’s almost shocked when that isn’t the car which pulls up outside their house that evening. But of course, the family would take the father’s car, would ride together.

Mr. Hargrove - Neil, as he introduces himself as - is dressed in slacks

and a button down, a checkered sweater vest on top. He's got an arm around Susan, who's dressed in a simple green dress, and he leads her the whole way to the door and further inside to greet Ted.

Max seems to have been wrangled into a dress she didn't want to wear, based on the sour expression on her face and the way she keeps pulling at the skirt. But she gives Karen a quick smile, and then darts past her to go talk to Mike. Who does look equally uncomfortable in the dress shirt Karen had forced him into.

Billy's last. He's got a black button up on with the collar undone. It's not as far as that first night she met him, but it's still far too far to be considered decent. He grins at her, and says, in a voice that can almost be considered sultry, "Mrs. Wheeler," before stepping inside. His earring's gone, as are his rings, she notes. She can still see the pendant around his neck catching the light as he moves, though.

She wonders if he's going to go to Nancy, but he doesn't, he just sort of... hangs there in the background, as though he's awaiting instructions on what to do.

Karen claps her hands and leads everyone into the dining room, asking them to take their seats while she brings the food out. As she comes back out with it, she takes note on the seating they've chosen. It seems like the children have taken one end, the adults the other.

Ted had placed Holly at the head of the table, Mike and Max on one end and Billy and Nancy on the other. Susan sits beside Max, Neil beside her. There's one chair left empty between Ted and Nancy for her, and Karen places the food down on the table and takes a seat.

"May I lead the table in saying Grace?" Neil asks, and Karen's a little taken aback. Her family goes to church on Christmas and Easter, but they've never been known to pray before dinner.

"Go ahead," Ted says, and takes her hand, Karen taking Nancy's.

Max rolls her eyes and Mike sends her a disbelieving look, but Karen glares sharply at him and he reluctantly takes Max' and Holly's hands.

"Bless us, O Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen." Neil follows it up with the Sign of the Cross and Karen scrambles to follow. "Thank you," Neil says, looking up at her and Ted. "In our family, we believe prayer and a strong belief in God may help free us from sins and evil spirits which may take ahold of us in times of weakness." There's a loaded quality to his words, and Karen sees Max scrunch up her nose. Beside her, Nancy turns to look at Billy, but from her seat Karen can't see the expression he's making.

Ted hums, reaching out and starting to pile food onto his plate, the rest of the table following suit. "Karen tells me you moved in here from California? I can't imagine what Hawkins has to offer that would be more interesting than what you left behind?"

"I received a better job offer. Security. You have to be quite fit to work in that area," Neil answers, sounding almost defensive. As though he needs to prove to them he's as good as they are. "And... there was an *incident*," he adds tightly.

Billy scoffs, and out of the corner of her eye, Karen sees Max shoot him a worried look from across the table. She's captivated by Neil though, by the harsh, commanding look in his eyes.

He turns his head to glance down at Billy, his jaw working as he chews and swallows. "Something you want to share with the rest of us, son?"

Billy's voice is uncharacteristically quiet when he speaks, "No, sir."

Mike's gaze is shifting, back and forth between Max and Billy. Once again, Karen wonders what Billy looks like.

The conversation moves on, and Ted becomes increasingly more interested once they find out Neil's a veteran. They compare war stories. Neil was deployed far longer than Ted, but Ted has always been patriotic.

"Your family is lovely, by the way," Susan tells her. "Three children. And they're all so very well behaved."

That seems to catch Neil's interest, because before Karen has the chance to answer, he's cutting in, nodding towards Nancy.

"Indeed. Perhaps Nancy could go shopping with Maxine some day. She seems like a good girl, the type I'd be proud if my son were to bring home."

“I have a boyfriend,” Nancy speaks up.

Billy chuckles. “Yeah, one whom you cheated on Steve with.”

This was news to Karen. Of course, Nancy didn’t tell her she was dating Steve until it was almost over between them. But Jonathan has been over a few times, and he seems like a good boy. He was raised by Joyce Byers, after all. Can’t imagine them cheating.

“I’m not going to be discussing my personal life with you, Billy.”

“I’m just saying. You’re not so perfect.”

“No,” Neil says, bringing Karen’s gaze back to him. “You would know all about that, wouldn’t you, Billy?”

“Yeah, dad. I would,” Billy answers, sounding like he’s challenging his father to something.

What commences is a staring match between father and son that goes on for far too long.

In the end, Karen breaks the uncomfortable silence by standing up. “Well,” she says. “I should be bringing out dessert now.”

She'd made a pie earlier, and she gets it from the kitchen along with fresh plates, taking everyone's used ones back to the kitchen.

She's half expecting Neil to wish to say another prayer, but he doesn't. Instead he takes one bite and hums in pleasure, directing something her way for the first time all evening.

"You're an incredible cook, Karen. Susie, you should take her up on that offer with the recipe club. You might learn something."

For all his faults, Karen is so incredibly glad of the fact that she could never imagine Ted speaking of her that way. Patronising. Like he *owns* her.

But Susan just smiles one of her nervous little smiles, says, "Yes, Neil," and nods. Like a good little doll.

Beside her, Nancy and Billy seem to have evolved into a discussion of their literature homework. It's heated, but friendly, and Karen is glad something is at least going well tonight.

When the Hargrove-Mayfields leave, Mike immediately rushes off to his room to change out of 'these stupid clothes', Nancy yawns and says she's going to bed, taking Holly up with her, and Karen goes with Ted to the kitchen.

He brings in the dirty dishes for her and stays in the kitchen as she washes them.

“What did you think of them?” Karen asks him.

“Well, Susan seemed nice. Mike and Maxine were already friends, and the son seemed alright. I’m glad Nancy not dating him, though.”

“And Neil?”

“He was... an interesting fellow.” He sighs. “To be quite honest, Karen, I didn’t much care for the... signals, he was giving off. Seemed like he was trying to make up for something.”

Karen’s heart warms at hearing it. “I think I’ll be seeing more of Susan.”

Ted pushes himself away from the counter he was leaning against. “I’m going off to bed. You did a great job with the food. I’m glad you made another friend. Good night.”

And he leaves her there. In the kitchen. The dirty dishes her only company.

---

Karen decides to call another meeting.

“I had dinner with them,” she tells the others as they sit assembled in her living room.

“Oh, what were they like?” Claudia asks. “Billy came to pick up Max once and the poor boys stomach was growling so loud he got embarrassed. I give him a bag of chocolate muffins.”

*Oh, Claudia. Bless her dear heart.*

“Neil, that’s the father, he seemed very... strict. Threatening, almost. Susan seemed almost fearful off him, and she made it sound like she couldn’t associate with me unless he agreed.”

Viola nods. “He’s definitely abusing them. Or, Billy, at least.”

Joyce leans forward on her seat. “You’re certain.”

Viola smiles sadly. “He practically admitted it to me. Not in so many words, but around two weeks ago, he came to pick up Max. Injured. Someone had hit him with something heavy, bruised his ribs. He tried to play it off as a fight with someone, but his knuckles weren’t bruised, and... those injuries were bloody.” She shakes her head. “That was a one sided fight.”

“Well, did you-?”

“I took photos of them. Gave them to him, in case he ever decided to do something.”

Joyce nods. “Good.”

“Well, can’t we do anything more?” Karen asks, incredulous. “Call the police?” She turns to Joyce. “Chief Hopper-“

“It wouldn’t help,” Joyce says.

“Why wouldn’t it help?” Claudia asks.

“It could go either of two ways,” Viola answers. “Either, Billy agrees to speak against his father, and he ends up in foster care, and we don’t know what happens to Max. Or, he denies anything is happening at all, and his father will hurt him as punishment for making someone concerned enough to call it in. And then I wouldn’t only be helping him in my kitchen, but at the hospital, too.”

“Well what do we do, then?” Karen asks.

“You need to get Susan to testify against her husband,” Joyce says.

“How?”

“Be her friend. Make her feel safe, like she has someone to go to for help. Reassure her she isn’t alone. I don’t think he’s hurting Max, but he could be hurting Susan, and it’s hard. Daring to leave.” Joyce looks down, swallowing. “I know. I’ve lived it. And I didn’t dare do anything until he went for my children.”

---

Hawkins winters can be brutal, and Billy doesn’t have a coat. Nothing thicker than that flimsy leather jacket of his.

This is what Joyce thinks of when she walks up to the Camaro. Max is finishing up with the boys inside, and Billy’s got the window rolled down, smoke curling out of the car.

She goes up to it, leans her back against the door to the backseat, her own cigarette in hand. “You got a light?”

Billy nods, reaching out through the window for her cigarette. She hands it to him, and watches as the light from the flame illuminates a yellowing black eye. She takes the burning cigarette from him when it’s offered to her, putting it in between her lips and taking a deep drag.

The window to the living room is left open an inch or so, and through it, they can hear the sudden sound of Steve's laughter. Joyce watches Billy as a small smile grazes his lips, as his eyes turn fond, and nods to herself.

"He's a good guy. Steve. You're lucky to have him."

"I'm sorry?" Billy says, sounding equal parts confused and panicked.

"It's alright," Joyce says. "And Steve's nice. He takes care of those he cares about."

"I don't know what you-?"

"Between the two of us, I kissed the head cheerleader behind the bleachers once, back in high school."

For a moment or so, there's a stunned silence. Then, "You did?"

"Yeah. But alas," Joyce sighs. "It was not to be. She started dating Hop that same month. Said he was almost a male version of me, and that was as much as she could let herself have."

"Harsh."

Joyce laughs. “Yes. But at least she did say I was a better kisser than him.”

“Well, for the record, Ms. Byers, I think you’re also much better looking than he is.”

Joyce smiles. “But he isn’t so bad, is he? I do think I love him. I’ve loved him a long time.”

It’s quiet for a bit after that, a contemplative silence.

“I take it you like both, then?” Billy asks.

“I do.”

Billy nods. “So does Steve.”

Joyce smiles. “Yes. I thought he might. It’s alright.”

Billy seems to hesitate before speaking. “Would it... Would it be alright if I only liked one? Only liked other...? I-“

“Yes. Yes, Billy. That would be alright.”

---

“Ted? We need to talk.”

Karen is leaning against the door opening to the living room. She's just put Holly to bed, and Nancy went to sleep a while ago, Mike at a sleepover at the Hendersons'.

Ted looks up from the paper he's reading, leaning back in his recliner. It's dark in the living room, the only light a lamp beside him.

Karen smiles at him. “Do you love me?”

Ted frowns. “Of course I do. You're my wife.”

Karen nods, shrugging. “It doesn't feel like it. Or, well. I don't feel appreciated, is the thing, I think. I've been thinking about leaving you.”

He looks taken aback. Pales a little, and for the first time in years Karen wonders if maybe he does, actually, love her. “You have?”

She nods quickly. “But I don’t think I want to. Because, see, I like this life. I like this house, and I like this family, and I like that I can go out with my friends during the day. But I... I’m missing... *romance.*”

A wrinkle appears between his eyebrows, and Karen thinks that there is a reason all her romance novels are written by women.

“I’m lonely,” she says. “And I’m afraid that when the kids move out, I won’t have anything to do. I don’t... I don’t want to live like your housekeeper, Ted. Like we’re just two roommates. You’re my husband, you’re supposed to... to... take care of me, and love me, and.”

“I thought I was?”

“Ted. You’ve given me a house and food on the table and beautiful children, but...” she sighs. “I wouldn’t have minded working. I’m scared that when the kids leave, they will take all my life’s meaning with them. All my purpose. And I don’t want to become the type of woman who starts hounding her children for grandkids just because she can’t handle an empty nest. I need to feel like the two of us.” She gestures between them, Ted following her movement with his eyes. It feels like this is the most attention he’s paid her in years. “Are going to be alright even without them. I’m still beautiful, and I... I have *so much* to offer. I want us to... I want us to talk to each other, late at night. About our days, and movies and books and music and the state of the world. And I... You haven’t made love to me in years, Ted. Not since Holly was born.”

She sees him count back in his head, sees the way his mouth falls

open when he realises how long it's actually been. He sits up a little straighter. "I'm sorry. I've just had so much- I've been-"

Karen holds a hand up. "I don't want any excuses. I just want things to change."

Ted's silent for a moment, then he nods. "So do I. What to you...? How should we do this?"

"Well..." she smirks and walks up to him, sitting down on the armrest of the recliner. "Since you're asking... I want us to do date nights. Two times a month. Fridays. There's a..." She rests her hand on his upper thigh. Her smile widens when she hears him take in a shuddering breath, looking up at her, eyes wide behind the glasses. "A motel, by the highway outside of town. It isn't the most glamorous place, but I think it might be fun?" Her hand inches higher. "It would feel a little dangerous. Like we're teenagers, sneaking out and doing things we're not supposed to. Nancy could take care of the other two, and we could go to dinner before, and then you could show me how much you appreciate me?"

Ted's hand closes around her wrist, fingers loose. "Why don't I... why don't I show you how much I appreciate you right now? Don't- Don't get me wrong, I like your idea, and I want to, but I also-"

"What about the kids?" Karen whispers.

"Mike's out, and the girls are sleeping, but we could... we could do it in the shower. Or the bathtub. I've never..."

She interrupts him again, turning her hand so she's holding his. "Yes. Yes," she says, laughing lightly. "Yes, God, Teddy. Yes. Right now."

She hasn't called him that in years. He realises it the same time he does, and suddenly, she thinks his eyes look a little wet.

Quickly, because she doesn't want this to evolve into crying, not tonight, she leans forward and captures his lips in a kiss. Then she stands up, and drags him with her up the stairs, feet feeling lighter than they have in ages.

---

Karen's picking Mike up from the Byers' when she sees them.

Usually, she would ask Nancy, but Nancy is out on a date with Jonathan, so Karen goes to pick her son up. She knocks on the door, and is surprised to find Lucas the one to open it. Turns out Joyce isn't home, and Steve Harrington is the one babysitting them. She knew he did that sometimes, that he drives the kids around and acts a bit like an older brother to Dustin who doesn't have any siblings. She's even had him hang out with both Jonathan and Nancy while they watched over the kids during their games.

Off by the tree line, the blue standing out in the light of the snow, Billy's Camaro also stands parked. And Karen suddenly remembers what Billy had said, during the dinner with their families, about Nancy and Jonathan and Steve.

And Karen's curious. So she tells Lucas to let Mike know she's waiting for him outside, and then she goes to stand by her car, eyes fixed on the Camaro. Steve wasn't inside, at least she couldn't hear him but she could hear all the kids, and to her knowledge, neither was Billy.

There's the sudden sound of a door banging open from behind the house, followed by loud laughter.

Then a yelp, almost a scream, and Karen is off, walking around the house. She takes slow steps, hoping to go unnoticed until she knows what's going on.

"Steve!" That's Billy, but he sounds... happy? "It's fucking cold!"

"I'll warm you up, then," Steve says, and Karen takes a peak around the corner.

Billy's on his back in the snow, and Steve is...

Steve is lowering himself over the other boy, and kissing him.

Karen pulls back quickly.

“I can’t wait to get you out of those wet clothes,” Steve says, and oh, dear, now Karen’s blushing.

There’s a muted thud, and Karen imagines Steve laid down beside Billy. Wonders if they’re holding hands. Thinks about Billy saying Nancy wasn’t his type, and thinks that now, she understands what he’d meant.

“We could make snow angels,” Steve continues. “God, Billy, you look like an angel.”

Billy laughs, but Karen can’t help but smile a little. He does look like an angel, a fallen one, but an angel nonetheless. For all his talk of prayer, Neil Hargrove is the real demon, who broke his son’s wings. Karen’s going to do her best to help him heal.

She uses the sound of his laughter as cover as she hurries back to her car. And just in time. Mike slips out of the house the second she’s sat down.

---

Ted’s finishing up in the bathroom that Friday, when Karen opens the front door to see Steve getting out of his car with Lucas and Dustin in

tow. Will's already here, down in the basement with Mike. Jonathan dropped him off as he came to pick up Nancy half an hour ago.

And Karen asked Steve to babysit. And...

"Hi, Holls!" he exclaims as he steps inside the house, Holly immediately rushing up to hug him. "Did Will make you some new drawings to paint?"

... Holly likes him.

She nods, taking his hand and dragging him off towards the living room where the watercolour is. On his way past Karen, he throws her a quick "Hi, Mrs. Wheeler! You look great!" before he disappears through the doorway.

Karen laughs, smiling to the retreating back of Dustin and Lucas as they rush down into the basement. She turns back to the still open door as she hears the Camaro pull up.

Max gets out, and before Billy can drive off, Karen steps out. "Billy! Can I speak to you for a moment?"

Max looks confused between the two of them, but then shrugs, saying a quick greeting as she slips past Karen, pulling off her booths and going downstairs to the others.

Billy throws the car in park and steps out, pulling his leather jacket tighter around himself as he goes up to her. Karen closes the door behind him, and takes care that no one else is within hearing range before turning to him.

Billy smirks at her, eyeing her dress and done up hair. He leans back, arms crossed. “What did you want to talk about, then?”

Karen lowers her voice and steps closer, ignoring the way Billy’s eyebrows raise. “I saw you and Steve. At the Byers’. In the snow.”

And just like that, the mask falls.

Billy swallows, trying to take a step back before seeming to realise he’s already leaning against the door. His gaze flickers towards the hallway leading deeper into the house, where he must realise Steve is, having seen his car parked outside.

When he looks back at her, he just looks really, really young. “I can take Max and leave. Get out of your hair. You won’t ever have to see me again. But don’t- Steve, he didn’t- It was my fault, okay, you don’t have to-“

Karen holds her hands up in a manner she hopes is placating. It has the opposite effect as Billy flinches, eyes screwing shut and bending his neck so his face is turned towards the floor.

“Hey, no...” Karen whispers. “It’s okay. I’m sorry. I was only telling

you because I thought that... Well, Ted and I, we're going out, every other Friday, and Nancy and Jonathan try to see each other every Friday. I'm letting her stay at his place when Joyce is there. But that means that Steve is sleeping here, to watch over the kids. And... if- If you don't have anywhere to be, if your parents don't need you home, then you could stay here."

Slowly, Billy looks up at her. Stares at her in disbelief. "What?"

"I thought you might want a safe place to hang out together," Karen explains, smiling a little. "Of course, I don't want to come home to any... '*mess*'. But the kids will sleep downstairs, and the couch in the living room is a pull-out. You'll have free reign in the kitchen, too."

"Are you messing with me?"

"No," Karen says gently. "And of course, you'd still need to keep an eye on the kids. But I thought it might be nice to have somewhere to go for date nights. Since... I imagine it's hard to go out eating dinner together."

"You're insane," Billy says, still staring up at her. "You can't mean any of that."

"I do. I really, really do. My father got sick just as I got out of high school. I missed a lot of my youth taking care of him and my mother. I want you to get to have as much as you can."

“Mrs. Wheeler,” Billy says. “I could kiss you right now.”

Her smile is shaky, but it’s there. “Please don’t.”

He doesn’t. He does, however, step forward and throw his arms around her.

“Thank you,” he whispers, and Karen doesn’t think she’s imagining her dress getting a little wet where his face is pressed against her.

She brings her arms up and holds him. “Steve’s in the living room, painting with Holly. Go.”

He nods against her, and then he’s pulling back, taking off his shoes and going. Ted comes down a minute later, taking her hand and leading her outside to his car. He doesn’t say anything about the other two cars parked outside.

And Karen thinks that Ted isn’t her prince. But she’s probably too old to be a princess, anyway. Maybe they can become each other’s King and Queen, instead.

---

When Karen opens the door, Susan looks ready to turn right back around.

“Oh!” she says, wringing her hands. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know who to go to, I just needed to talk to someone- I shouldn’t have bothered you, I’m sorry, I should leave.“

Karen opens the door wider. “Come inside, Susan. I just finished a pot of tea.”

Susan looks equal parts apprehensive and relieved, but she follows Karen inside and takes a seat at the kitchen table. As Karen readies the mugs of tea, Susan starts speaking.

“I’m sorry, again, I just... Billy’s sick. The flu, I think. But the thing is, Neil, he- He didn’t believe Billy. Or me. Said Billy was just hungover, wouldn’t let me call him in sick. Not- Not until he punched him, in the stomach, and Billy threw up all over him. N-Neil slapped him for it. He needed to shower, change clothes, and ended up being late for work. But at least he let me call in Billy sick, because, well, usually, Billy doesn’t throw up when he does that, and I just- Jesus Christ, ‘usually’ ... It- It *shouldn’t be* anything that happens so frequently I can say that- Oh, God ....”

Karen hands Susan her mug, and notices both their hands are trembling.

“I can’t- We can’t stay with him,” Susan says, lifting her mug with both hands to take a sip.

For the first time, it hits Karen that she isn't particularly equipped to deal with a situation like this. Joyce would have a much better idea of what to say.

But then again, Joyce Byers is probably exactly the type of woman Neil Hargrove wouldn't want his wife associating with. She's a strong single mother who threw out her abusive husband. Not exactly who a man like him would want his wife hanging around.

"He's only sixteen, he doesn't deserve to spend his last teenage years living like this," Susan continues. "But also... when he's gone, Neil will... h-he will..."

*He will either turn on Susan or Max.*

"We'll go to Chief Hopper," Karen says, placing her hand on Susan's. "And I know... Lucas' mum, she's a doctor. She told me she was worried about Billy," It's a white lie, and not entirely without truth, but she thinks Susan would appreciate this better than the whole truth. "Since she knows the two of us are friends. Apparently Billy was hurt, once when he came to pick up Maxine, and he agreed to let her take photos of his injuries. In case he would ever need them. So... there is evidence. Against Neil."

Susan looks a little stunned. Then she looks down, and her shoulders start shaking. "I'm sorry," she says. "I just... I never thought we could leave him. I'm so... I'm ready to try."

Karen squeezes her hand, and then she drives them down to the station.

---

“I went shopping for new wallpapers with Susan last week,” Karen says.

They’re all in her living room again, the window open. Outside, they can hear birdsong, and Karen sees a bumblebee, followed by a butterfly, flutter past against the backdrop of the trees starting to flower.

“They’re having a housewarming party next week, aren’t they?” Viola asks, smiling.

Joyce nods. She’s been hanging out with Susan more since that day Karen drove them to the station. “Susan doesn’t have that many friends, but she is inviting all of us, since we’re Max’ friends’ family. And Steve, too.”

“That’s nice of her.”

“I’m going to make her a cake,” Claudia says. “And Tews just had kittens. Maybe they’d like a kitten, too? Dusty wants his friends to all

get one.”

“Erica would love a kitten.”

Karen smiles. “Holly, too.”

Joyce nods, contemplative. “We used to have a dog, but I think the boys wouldn’t mind a kitten.”

“Perfect!” Claudia says. “I’ll check with Susan at the party, and then we’ll talk logistics.”

“Well, ladies,” Karen says, and looks at these three women she’s grown closer to since she first called them to her all those weeks ago. “I think we did a good job.”

“Oh, yes!” Joyce says. “That reminds me. I let it slip to Will how amazing I thought all of you were and how glad I was we were hanging out more, and well, he likes all of you as well, so he made me this.” She reaches into her bag, and brings out a drawing.

It’s quite clearly all four of them, dressed as superheroes and flying with capes fluttering behind them, the word ‘Super’ written on their clothes. Above them, it says ‘Super Mums’.

“‘Super Mum’,” Karen reads, smiling. “I think I like the sound of that. Helping protect Hawkins the way only mums can.”

*Super Mums.*

**Author's Note:**

I hope you guys liked it, please tell me your thoughts!

(Also, I'm not Christian; that prayer was pulled straight from Wikipedia. If an actual Christian has an opinion on it, please let me know!)